

Sensemaking in the Time of COVID-19

Marlys K. Christianson^a  and Michelle A. Barton^b 

^a*University of Toronto;* ^b*Johns Hopkins University*

Keywords: attention, managing unexpected events, plausibility, sensemaking, updating

When people encounter surprising or confusing events, they engage in sensemaking to answer the questions, ‘what’s the story?’ and ‘now what?’ (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is a socially constructed process in which individuals interact with their environment and with others to create meaning and enable action. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment that is dynamically uncertain – routines are upended, normal interactions are disrupted, and risk must be reassessed on an ongoing basis. We have rarely seen a time when sensemaking was so critical yet so difficult to accomplish. The pandemic offers the unique opportunity to study sensemaking within a context that is enormously complex, novel, and rapidly changing. At the same time, this pandemic brings to the foreground assumptions and questions about sensemaking theory that have remained largely unexamined. Studying the pandemic will allow sensemaking scholars to not only better understand sensemaking in this extreme context but also to grapple with central theoretical questions that have not yet been fully understood. Below, we consider the pandemic’s implications for studying sensemaking processes and for understanding those processes within a broader context. We conclude with possible future directions for sensemaking research.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PANDEMIC FOR STUDYING SENSEMAKING

The context of the pandemic – emergent and fast-paced, unpredictable and overwhelming – complicates sensemaking. We explore the *noticing*, *meaning-making*, and *action* facets of sensemaking. While these facets are often intertwined (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), for

Address for reprints: Marlys K. Christianson, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, 105 St. George St, Toronto, ON, Canada, M5S 3E6. 416-978-0250 (marlys.christianson@rotman.utoronto.ca).

the purposes of discussing the implications of the pandemic for sensemaking research, we consider them separately.

Noticing

During the pandemic, people have had to make sense of large amounts of information over long periods of time, frequently updating their understanding of the evolving situation. Since the pandemic impacts all aspects of people's lives, there are often competing demands for attention (e.g., work vs. home). All of this makes it difficult to determine which cues to focus on, and in what order.

The pandemic highlights the importance of considering attentional capacity and fatigue. Actors' ability to engage in sensemaking is often taken-for-granted. However, the vast number of cues generated by and about the pandemic may affect the quantity and quality of attention during sensemaking. First, attending to multiple cues may lead to attentional fatigue. More broadly, the process of making and remaking sense is effortful (Christianson, 2019) and doing so over extended periods of time may deplete cognitive resources. Last, monitoring a wide range of potentially relevant cues may lead to disrupted attentional stability and vividness and make it difficult for people to triangulate their attention on key issues (Rerup, 2009; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006). Overall, we need to understand more about how and when cues are noticed during extreme unexpected events. The pandemic also raises broader questions such as: How do people continue to make sense and update their understanding over long periods of time? Does updating become increasingly incremental with cognitive exhaustion? What determines the depletion or restoration of attention during sensemaking? What impact do multiple cues have on the quantity and quality of attention?

Meaning-Making

Because the pandemic is novel and emergent, information is often incomplete, fragmented or even contradictory, posing significant challenges for framing and interpretation. Sensemaking theory argues that constructing such information into sensible accounts is driven by plausibility, but what makes something 'plausible' is worth re-examining. Early work on sensemaking suggested that dissonance reduction contributed to perceived plausibility (Weick, 1995) but this notion remains understudied (Weick, 2020). Most sensemaking research has adopted an evolutionary perspective, which assumes that sensemaking becomes more plausible as it 'becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism' (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415). However, sensemaking is entangled with issues of identity, especially during moments of crisis and change (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). As people contend with the chaos of the pandemic, sensemaking may be motivated by goals other than increasing congruence with the data at hand. Accordingly, we need to better understand not just how people make sense but also why.

Diverse and often controversial narratives about the cause and nature of the pandemic surface a number of alternative motivations that may determine what seems 'plausible'. For example, as individuals unconsciously work to avoid the experience of anxiety triggered by crises, they may construct narratives designed more for emotional distancing

than for capturing reality (Barton and Kahn, 2019). Psychological defense may manifest in the creation of false or alternative narratives that are more emotionally palatable (Mikkelsen et al., 2020). Narratives embracing scientifically disproven remedies or rejecting death tolls as fake may not be ‘failed’ sensemaking but rather plausible accounts shaped by the need for a sense of safety. Individual sensemaking may also be motivated by the need for social connection. As many suffer isolation from colleagues, friends and family, the longing to connect – to find one’s tribe – may result in narratives shaped by the desire to ally with a social movement or claim a political identity.

Contemplating the challenges of meaning-making during the pandemic highlights more general questions about sensemaking such as: What makes something ‘plausible’? How and when is meaning-making shaped by other motivations such as the need for psychological defense or social connection? How do people reconcile conflicting information or accounts?

Acting

The general maxim in sensemaking is that people act their way into knowing. Action generates new cues, but the pandemic has disrupted how people take action. First, action has been severely constrained. Lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings mean that much action has stopped or been seriously reduced. With fewer occasions to interact with others, tasks, and the environment, there are fewer opportunities to generate cues. Second, actions are often distanced and differently embodied, whether because people are separated by masks and personal protective equipment or because they are communicating online, struggling to make themselves understood as a two-inch square on a video conferencing grid. Greater distances and reduced information channels diminish the richness and consistency of information flow. Finally, the pandemic has been characterized by latencies and delays – for instance, a high proportion of asymptomatic transmission and delays in reporting test results – that dissociate action from outcomes.

Considering the role of disrupted action raises questions like: How do constraints on action impact the generation and richness of cues for sensemaking? How do latencies or delays impact sensemaking? What happens when people can’t interact face-to-face in the ways they are used to? How does the virtual context change sensemaking?

INTERRELATEDNESS OF SENSEMAKING

Sensemaking research often bounds the investigation of sensemaking to a focal event – for instance, a natural disaster or new organizational change initiative. Yet, even as people try to make sense of an event, they are also engaged in everyday work and life. Unfortunately, the broader context in which sensemaking is embedded is often overlooked (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) and, in the case of this pandemic, that broader context is itself characterized by upheaval and disruption. The pandemic is occurring at the same time as a whole constellation of crises – e.g., the accompanying economic crisis, civil unrest in the face of racial inequality, and rapidly escalating consequences from climate change (wildfires, hurricanes, etc.). Sensemaking on multiple fronts heightens the challenges we noted earlier.

Sensemaking usually begins by noticing and bracketing some portion of the flow of experience. However, sensemaking in this pandemic occurs within the roiling turbulence at the confluence of *multiple* flows of experience. Noticing, meaning-making and action within one arena are impacted by simultaneously occurring sensemaking in other arenas. For example, how might our concerns over one crisis (e.g., COVID-19) impact the way we notice and interpret cues arising from another crisis (e.g., crowds of protesters)? How does action in one arena (e.g., wearing a mask) impact meaning-making within another (e.g., political engagement)? Moreover, the sheer number of different sensemaking and sensegiving entities – from governmental institutions to medical professionals to social media celebrities – make for a confusing array of narratives. The experiences of this pandemic, therefore, call on sensemaking scholars to expand our theorizing to better address the situated and interrelated nature of sensemaking processes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SENSEMAKING RESEARCH

COVID-19 and the ensuing pandemic have disrupted our world and created a level of ongoing uncertainty rarely experienced before, which presents a unique opportunity for deeper understanding of sensemaking under extreme circumstances. At the same time, there are lessons to be extracted from the pandemic that apply to much of today's more normal organizational functioning. Addressing these could help build a more elaborated understanding of sensemaking. We suggest three future directions for research.

Expand the Scope of Sensemaking Research

The pandemic is an unexpected event of unprecedented magnitude, duration, and reach, which may require scholars to broaden the methods they use and the theories they draw upon to study sensemaking. Specifically, the pandemic illuminates the importance of studying sensemaking in ways that are more attentive to the complex and dynamic environments in which sensemaking takes place and that encompass longer spans of time. For example, studying sensemaking trajectories will enrich our understanding of the factors that shape the unfolding of sensemaking over time.

Re-Examine Underlying Assumptions about Sensemaking

The pandemic highlights the need to revisit core issues related to sensemaking including attentional capacity, motivations for sensemaking, and enactment under constrained conditions. For instance, re-interrogating what 'plausible' means for sensemaking in various contexts and for various actors will enrich our theorizing. As we noted, there may be situations where the motivation for sensemaking may relate to reducing cognitive dissonance or building social connection instead of more closely approximating the situation at hand. In contrast, there may be other situations where plausibility aiming towards accuracy is critically important (Christianson, 2019). We encourage scholars to test underlying assumptions about sensemaking so theory becomes more nuanced and has more clearly delineated boundary conditions.

Study Sensemaking in More Places

Answering the questions we've posed may require learning from the real-world expertise of those engaged in sensemaking in the most challenging contexts. Healthcare is one such context. But others involved in front-line sensemaking during the pandemic may not be those we typically study. The pandemic is bringing to light the critical role played by people rarely studied by sensemaking scholars: grocery store employees and day care workers, teachers and delivery drivers, public health nurses and community organizers, restaurateurs and small-business owners. In a field often focused on corporate managers and elite first responders, these organizational actors are neither powerful nor sexy (from a research standpoint). This points to the need to revisit the alignment between where critical sensemaking is currently taking place and where we tend to study it. Sensemaking research can be enhanced by exploring it in a much wider range of organizations.

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